

Examining the English Language Arts Course Placement System at the College of the Marshall Islands

The College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) places many incoming students into developmental English language arts (ELA) courses. Given prior research on the poorer outcomes associated with placement in remedial coursework, this raises concerns about these students' likely academic success and graduation.¹ To increase the percentage of students who place into and pass credit-bearing ELA courses and persist to a second year, CMI modified its ELA course placement process. It now uses scores on a revised ELA course placement test (with a multiple-choice component and a writing component) and cumulative high school grade point average (GPA) to place students into one of the first-year ELA course levels. In addition to the regular pathway, CMI developed an intensive pathway for higher-scoring students in each level designed to accelerate their progress through developmental and credit-bearing ELA courses. This study examined ELA course placement, passing rates in credit-bearing courses, and college persistence rates among 1,019 students who enrolled at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024. It also evaluated the accuracy of CMI's ELA course placement test in predicting ELA performance among 1,098 students who took the ELA placement test between spring 2022 and spring 2024.

Key findings

- **Eleven percent of students who enrolled at CMI for the first time between spring 2022 and spring 2024 placed into credit-bearing (Level 4) ELA courses.** Of this 11 percent, 5 percent placed into the Level 4 regular pathway and 6 percent into the Level 4 intensive pathway. Eighty-nine percent placed into developmental courses (Levels 2 and 3). CMI's prior placement system had a credit-bearing placement rate of 22 percent.²
- **Students initially placed into intensive pathways in Level 4 (credit-bearing) and Level 3 (developmental) courses had the highest passing rates in credit-bearing courses.** Additionally, students placed in the regular pathways had similar credit-bearing course passing rates regardless of their starting ELA course level. This finding draws into question the necessity of having three initial course placement levels and indicates that CMI's intensive pathways may be associated with better student outcomes.
- **Students initially placed into intensive pathways had higher college persistence rates than students initially placed into regular pathways.** Persistence rates among students placed into regular pathways, regardless of level, were similar and were lower than the rates for all intensive pathways.
- **The multiple-choice component of the placement test and students' high school GPA similarly predicted passing credit-bearing ELA courses.** Students' performance on the multiple-choice component of the placement test and their high school GPA were positive predictors of passing credit-bearing ELA courses after other factors were accounted for. The writing component score did not statistically significantly predict passing credit-bearing courses.

1. Jaggars, S., & Stacey, G. W. (2014). *What we know about developmental education outcomes*. Columbia University, Community College Research Center, Teachers College. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED565668>

2. Shannon, L., Cosby, A., Rentz, B., Henschel, M., Arens, S. A., & Crowder, M. (2021). *Demographic and academic characteristics associated with college readiness and early college success in the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (REL 2021-072). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>